

Provenance

A Tale of Structural Dread

Michael S. Moniz, after H.P. Lovecraft

LV75

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I authenticate. It is the whole of my office. I am good at it, which I can say without pride, because the goodness is not in me. It is in the discipline, and the discipline is older than I am. It will go on doing its work long after there is no particular use for the man who performed it.

A record comes to me unestablished and I establish it, or I find that it cannot be established and return it so marked. To establish a thing is to lay its chain of custody end to end: this document begotten of that one, that one of the one before it, back and back to a root that needs no establishing because it is its own first cause — a birth, a death, a seam opened, a wall raised. When every link holds, the record stands, and what it records is true. Not believed. True. Since the convergence, that word has carried a weight it did not used to carry, and the carrying of it is my office.

Here is the thing they do not tell you when you take the seal, because before the convergence no one had to: a record, once established, is now more true than the thing it records. A man may remember the morning his daughter was born; the established record remembers it harder. Set the two against each other and the record wins, not because the man is lying, but because the air holds up the established thing and lets the unestablished thing fall. We do not decide

this. We authenticate. The authenticated rises. The rest goes down.

When I trained, they told me this made the office more important than it had ever been. That is true. It is not the part that matters. The part that matters is the part no one says aloud: that an office doing its work correctly has become the thing that decides what is real, and that a man who does the work correctly for long enough will, correctly, lose the ability to tell a thing that is true from a thing that has merely been established.

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This morning, before the woman, there was a man with a debt.

He stood at my counter and said he had paid it — a tier-bond, settled in full eleven years ago, to a lender since absorbed into a larger house. He remembered the day. He described the room, the clerk, the weather. The record showed the bond outstanding. The settlement had never been lodged. The lender's own books, established and sealed when the house absorbed them, carried the debt forward as live.

I laid the chain end to end. It held. The bond was issued, the bond was carried, the bond was inherited by the absorbing house, and at no link was a settlement established. The man's memory of the room and the clerk and the weather was not a link. It could not be one. A memory is not a document, and what is not a document cannot enter the chain.

I ruled the debt outstanding. It was correct. He will pay, eleven years on, a bond he very likely paid, because the

paying was never filed and the air no longer lets me weigh a true thing against an established one and find for the true. He looked at me the way they look. I returned his petition marked and called the next.

The next was the woman.

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She is no longer young. She contests a finding that removed her standing — a standing that rested, decades back, on a thing done for her by a man whose word would have established it. The man is dead. The thing was never recorded. It was personal; such things were, then. People did each other good turns and did not lodge them with a clerk. So the chain has a missing link, and a chain with a missing link cannot be established, and her standing falls. This is correct. I have written it for a hundred petitioners, and it is correct each time.

I begin to write it for her.

And she says my name.

Not my office. Not my seal. My name — the one from before the office, the one almost no one uses now, because in the archive I am a function and a mark, and the name is not the part that authenticates. She says it the way you say a name you have carried a long time.

She tells me that the man who did her the good turn was my father. That I was there, a boy, the morning he did it. That I will remember, because she remembers — because she has carried the morning for forty years, precisely so that on the day she needed a witness there would be one.

She tells me the morning. A seam-collapse on the fourth gallery, the year the lower tiers flooded; her household put out of its standing overnight, the chain of it broken in the water; and my father, who held an office like the one I hold now, finding in the wreck of her papers a single establishable link no one else had thought to look for. He lodged it himself, by hand, and stood surety for the rest until the chain could be rebuilt.

She tells me there was a boy with him who carried the lamp. The boy held it steady for an hour while my father worked and did not complain. She has remembered the boy's hand for forty years because it was the first kind thing that happened to her after the water.

I reach for it.

I want to set this down exactly, because it is the only thing this office has taught me that the office did not mean to teach. I reach for the morning she means — my father, this woman younger, a boy who would have been me — and where it should be there is a smooth, sealed, unbothered surface: the surface of a record that was never made.

It is not a gap. A gap has edges. You can feel where the thing should join. This has no edges. It is the place where a thing was never filed, and since the convergence the never-filed is not merely lost. It is held down, unreachable, under the established weight of everything that was. I know I had a father; that is in the archive. I cannot reach standing beside him on any morning, because standing beside a man is not a thing that gets recorded, and what was never recorded I can no longer reach.

Even when it is mine.

Even when it is me.

For the length of a breath there is something — not the morning, but the pressure of it where the morning should be. A steadiness in a hand. A smell of wet stone and burning oil. It presses once against the sealed surface from underneath, as though there were a link on the far side of the record — a link that, if I could only turn the record over, I might find already lodged, the chain already whole along an edge I am not built to read.

Then the surface is smooth again. The breath is gone. I cannot reach what I almost touched.

She is watching my face for the moment the witness wakes. I have watched a hundred petitioners watch a hundred records fail; I know the face she is making. It is the face of someone who built her whole standing on the certainty that a person is more than their file. I am about to be the proof that they are not, because I am a person, and I am reaching for myself, and I am finding only my file.

I write that the relationship is unestablished.

It is correct. There is no link. I cannot forge one out of a morning I cannot reach. To establish her claim on a witness I cannot produce would be to lodge in the archive a thing I cannot establish to be true, and the air no longer lets me tell that apart from a thing that is false. So I return her petition marked, and her standing falls, and she goes down toward the floor where the records do not reach.

I do not stop her. Stopping her would require me to attest to something I cannot find. The one thing I am certain of — that under the sealed surface there is a morning, a boy, a father, a good turn done — is the one thing I cannot put into

the archive, because it was never written, and the archive is now the world.

I survive it. That is the part I did not expect the first time, and would expect every time, if I kept count — which the office does not. The office does not record what it costs the officer, and so that too goes down. I survive by keeping out of the archive the single thing I know and cannot prove: that I am a man who once stood beside his father, and that I have just, correctly, ruled against the last person alive who could have established it.

In ruling against her, I have authenticated my own emptiness. Sealed it. Established it. Made it harder and truer than the morning it buried.

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We are not, in the office, supposed to wonder. Wondering is deliberation. Deliberation is not recorded. What is not recorded does not happen. And so I do not wonder, except that I am doing it now, and will not be able to reach having done it once the instant passes.

I can establish any record in the city. I can lay the chain of any standing end to end and tell you, to the link, whether it holds. I cannot establish my own reasons, because reasons are deliberation, and deliberation is not filed. I cannot establish that I knew the woman. I cannot establish that I ever had a within — that my rulings once turned on a thing a person would call judgment and not a thing a seal would call procedure. All of it was real. None of it was written. The air now holds up only what was written.

So I am becoming a record. No one designed this. No clerk erred. No chain broke. The office kept its shape after the air

changed, and the shape began using men as another kind of shelf. I authenticate. The authentications are correct. They rise into the world and decide what is real, and I am, year on year, less one of the real things, because the part of me that was real was never filed.

There is a morning I cannot reach. A boy beside his father. I am nearly certain it is mine. I cannot establish it.

The next petition will come to me unestablished. I will establish it or return it marked, and I will be correct, and I will not remember that I once stood beside anyone, because standing beside someone is not a thing the archive keeps, and I am now almost entirely archive.

I authenticate. It is the whole of my office. There is less each day to distinguish the office from me.